

Soldiers

Online



Crossroads of the Cold War

Story and Photos by Heike Hasenauer

GERMANY surrendered to the Allies in May 1945, and U.S. troops began arriving in Berlin the following month.

The city that had been relentlessly bombed by the United States, Great Britain and the Soviet Union, and ultimately captured by Soviet troops, lay in ruins. Added to the physical devastation was the psychological impact of a Germany divided into zones of occupation.

Berlin — Germany's former "intellectual, artistic and cultural" capital, according to historians — was separated into sectors of occupation.

The military commanders of the occupying powers — the United States, Great Britain, France and the Soviet Union — exercised full power over their individual portions of Berlin. Almost immediately, the armies began rebuilding the shattered city, restoring utilities, bringing in food and supplies, and providing jobs. The occupying forces were to control Berlin's destiny for some 50 years.

During that period, U.S. soldiers experienced some of the tensest periods of the Cold War. Those included the Soviet blockade of West Berlin, the portion of the then-divided city far behind the "Iron Curtain" that was surrounded by communist East Germany. And they participated in the 1948-1949 Berlin Airlift.

Allied planes flew 276,926 mis-

sions, bringing in food and supplies at three-minute intervals, 24 hours a day. Seventy-six people died, among them 31 U.S. servicemen, but the airlift played a critical role in preserving West Berlin's freedom.

Armies in the three Western sectors of Berlin also witnessed the atrocities committed by East German border guards, who gunned down their own people who tried to escape over the Berlin Wall or across the Spree River to freedom.

From 1946 to 1991, some 6,700 soldiers were stationed in Berlin as part of U.S. Army Berlin Brigade. On Sept. 8, 1994, when the U.S. flag was furled, the ceremony ended almost half a century of U.S. and Allied occupation of West Berlin.

The U.S. Army's facilities in Berlin have almost all been returned to Germany, said COL Eric Hammersen, U.S. Defense Attaché to Berlin. Today, the American flag flies over the



(Above) East German soldiers once guarded the East Berlin memorial to fallen comrades.

(Above, left) From 1962 until Allied forces departed Berlin, Checkpoint Charlie was an Allied control point monitored by U.S., British and French military police.

American Consulate building in the former Berlin Brigade compound. And the compound itself stands as it was. However, except for offices used by U.S. Embassy personnel, it's empty.

A short distance from the compound, on Clayallee, sits the German-operated Allied Museum, located in the former Outpost Theater where U.S. service members watched the latest movies of the time. The museum preserves the symbols of Berlin's history during the Allies' occupation.

It contains the original Checkpoint Charlie, the former U.S. border crossing point on Friedrichstrasse, one of the planes that participated in the



A memorial to East Berliners who were gunned down during attempts to flee communism once adorned the western side of the wall, beyond the East's horrific "death strip."

airlift, a former train from the East, and a piece of the Wall. The museum is open six days a week, except Wednesdays. The German government operates it, but the Allied ambassadors form its board of directors.

"It's one of the few things remain-

Berlin and leads battlefield staff rides in Europe. "The Cold War is foreign to kids. The museum helps them understand why there's such a special relationship between the Western Allies and the people of Berlin."

The big Truman Plaza American

From 1946 to 1991, some 6,700 soldiers were stationed in Berlin as part of U.S. Army Berlin Brigade. On Sept. 8, 1994, when the U.S. flag was furled, the ceremony ended at

ing that the Western Allies are working on together in the city," said retired COL Bill Kurzman, who teaches at Berlin's John F. Kennedy International School.

German school children visit the museum to learn about Berlin's military history. Exhibit texts are all presented in English, French and German.

"A child born when the Wall opened is now 11 years old," said retired COL Stephen Bowman, former deputy commander of the Berlin Bde, who lives in



The Berlin Brigade compound on Clayallee remains as it was when it was occupied by the U.S. commander, Berlin.

‘The museum helps them understand why there’s such a special relationship between the Western Allies and the people of Berlin.’

shopping center, across the street from Berlin Bde. HQs., was a hub of activity for U.S. soldiers and families. It’s been leveled, but the “Truman Plaza” sign still stands.

There is also a sign identifying the old Berlin-American High School, although the building is now used by the German school system, as are the swimming pool and sports center that were located behind the post exchange complex. The former NCO club that stood on the street corner across from Berlin Bde. HQs. is now the Japanese Cultural Center.

Andrews Barracks — off Finckensteinallee, a cobblestone street lined with massive old lilac trees — is now part of Germany’s national archives, which uses buildings that once housed U.S. soldiers. The old

chapel at Andrews is a library.

Nearby, at McNair Barracks — which once housed combat-arms soldiers — the blue curtains that hung in Army billets during the Cold War still covered the windows in July 2000.

And other signs remained on some of the old, pastel yellow buildings, including the “Berlin Bde. Aid Station,” and the “Mann Fitness Center.”

A German developer is building a

large housing area on half of the former barracks complex. The other half, used before the Allied occupation as a manufacturing center for electrical components for radar and sonar, remains under historical protection, Bowman said.

That half includes the former U.S. Army Starlite Enlisted Club, the Berlin Bde. parade ground, clock tower and troop barracks.

“Those buildings can be reno-

Assignment: Berlin

IN the Defense Attaché Service, as a sergeant, staff sergeant or sergeant first-class, you have to be able to meet with a foreign minister of defense and represent the U.S. Department of Defense,” said CW2 Tom Castle, who’s assigned to the U.S. Embassy in Berlin.

“The job sounds very romantic to many people. Often it isn’t. You’re always on call, and you’re often standing on a flight line, bored to tears, waiting for a high-level visitor to arrive,” he said.

You can also be pulled from one assignment to another at a moment’s notice, said Defense Attaché COL Eric Hammersen. “When we opened the embassy in Moldova, soldiers were pulled from other embassies around the world to help set that one up.”

Castle, who came to Berlin in August 1998, will depart for Harare, Zimbabwe, next July. He was in Ankara, Turkey, for three and a half years.

SFC Michael McDonald, the Army operations NCO in Berlin, came to Berlin from Tanzania, where the embassy was bombed. “I helped put it back together again and set up the house for the incoming defense attaché,” said McDonald, who’s been in his current position roughly a year. Earlier, he spent 14 months in Bonn and two years at the U.S. Embassy in Minsk, Belarus.

McDonald went into Tanzania from Berlin, then returned to Berlin to support President Bill Clinton’s visit, Hammersen said. “He went from setting up housing in Tanzania, to standing at an airport to receive the most senior U.S. leaders, including the

vated," Bowman said, "but their outsidess must remain intact."

McNair's former Rod and Gun Club and "Stars and Stripes" store have been combined to form a local German citizens' museum. Under an organization called Initiativkreis, its members — former Berlin Bde. employees — keep the memory of the Allies' presence in Berlin alive.

The international development firm that is expected to build homes on the other half of the former barracks complex, "wants us to remain here," said archivist Ray Dutt, "to draw American visitors here to learn about the city's history from 1945 to 1994."

The museum exhibits focus largely on the civilians who worked for the Allies, said Dutt, who worked for the U.S. military for 24 years. And it's intended as a place to which former soldiers and civilians of the occupied city can return, reminisce and share their own stories.

Outside, numerous signs from the former active post decorate the white-frame structure, among them a sign that reads: "Berlin Brigade Employment Office."

Dutt, who recently welcomed seven 1947 veterans to the museum, is among seven German citizens who operate the museum and pay 800 Deutschmarks annually, about \$400, to rent the building.



Signs at McNair Barracks, once home of U.S. infantry soldiers in Berlin, remain at a former Stars and Stripes bookstore converted by German citizens into a museum.

In 1994, there were 7,000 local nationals working for the Allies, Dutt said. "The Americans were one of our largest employers. Between 1945 and 1994, some 250,000 Germans worked for the Allies here. So our hearts will always be with them."

Across the street from McNair, the Berlin Bde. motor pool, maintenance area and gas storage area are now the largest garden store and home-improvement center in Berlin.

The former AFN-Berlin complex was torn down and replaced by a housing area. Harnick House, the former officers club, the former U.S. Dahlem Guest House, and the Commandantur, where the Allies

came together for their meetings, were all taken over by Berlin's Free University, Bowman said.

Several sets of quarters in the former Dahlem U.S. government housing area today house U.S. Embassy employees. And the former U.S. military hospital is now a German hospital. The Von Steuben Center that was a U.S. warehousing complex is similarly used today by the Germans.

"Every replacement part, every bullet, all the housing and the furniture were paid for by the German people. Most people don't realize that," said Bowman. "We had a higher standard

deputy defense secretary."

"Each post has a different appeal," said Castle. "I loved Ankara for the people and the operations mission. I love Berlin for the people and the city. There's so much history here."

"Everyone in our system is hand-picked," Castle continued. "Soldiers can volunteer for an assignment to the Defense Attaché Service. Air Force personnel must go to Washington, D.C., where they and their families are interviewed. Army personnel submit an application package to the Joint Field Support Center in Hanover, Md."

"The DAS will take people from all backgrounds," McDonald said. "But you need to be an office manager and logistician. On one hand, you have to be able to type a letter to account for hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of furniture or electronic equipment. On the other hand,

you have to be able to act diplomatically."

Assignments are typically for three years, Castle said, except when the embassy is in a very remote location.

Training for a first assignment includes the Attaché Staff Operations Course for enlisted personnel. Officers undergo a comparable, eight- to nine-month course, plus language courses.

Castle, who underwent 32 weeks of Turkish language training before being sent to Ankara, said, the attaché service takes the most qualified service applicant for a position. "If you're Air Force," which he was at the time he was selected, "you can be put into an available Army slot."

"The position here doesn't preclude soldiers from fulfilling Army requirements for ANCOC and BNCOC," Castle said. "We don't put on rucksacks, but when we go downrange, we could be the only U.S. soldier in the country." — Heike Hasenauer



CW2 Tom Castle (left) and SFC Michael McDonald enter the U.S. Embassy in Berlin.



Today, photos of a U.S. soldier and a Soviet soldier mark the site of the former Checkpoint Charlie, the crossing from East to West.

of living as U.S. soldiers in Berlin because we weren't paying for it. Because we were an occupying force, U.S. taxpayers did not pay for it."

Turner Barracks — where the Berlin Bde.'s armor was housed — was leveled and will soon be the site of exclusive condos, said COL Thomas Fosnacht, senior liaison officer in Berlin, who worked as a translator and analyst for the U.S. commandant in Berlin from 1978 to 1982.

Every soldier who served in Berlin can be proud of the role he or she played in bringing an end to the Cold War.

Potsdamer Platz was once no-man's land, home to a mound of dirt that was Hitler's bunker and site of the Brandenburg Gate. Checkpoint Charlie was just down the road. The House at Checkpoint Charlie museum is still where it was before the Wall came down, Fosnacht said.

Now, there's no Checkpoint Charlie. However, a copy of the famous "You're now leaving the American Sector" sign that stood near the checkpoint remains, and two large portraits of men in uniform — one American, one Russian — hang high above the former demarcation line between the U.S. and Soviet sectors.

The duty train has been integrated

into the S-Bahn line that was once the East German train line. And the S-Bahns and U-Bahns travel all over the city.

"Those who weren't here during the Cold War can't really understand what it was like," Hammersen said. "You couldn't just drive or take the train to Dresden, Leipzig, the Czech Republic, the Baltic states or Ukraine. We take that for granted today."

Hammersen, who came to Germany for the first time in 1954, when his father was with Seventh Army HQs., then in Stuttgart, returned in the 1970s as a young officer. He pulled tours in Germany in the '80s and '90s as well. "This is my sixth tour in Germany," he said.

Hammersen was in Berlin in November 1999, too, during the 10th anniversary of the Wall's demise. "Some 40,000 people were in the Brandenburg Gate area," he recalled. "They asked me, 'Is that a real U.S. Army uniform or a costume?' I said, 'It's real.'"

"They said, 'But we don't have any U.S. soldiers here.' I said, 'Yes, a few,'" Hammersen said. "Then they said, 'Thank you,' not to me, but to all the soldiers, 'for sticking with us all these years.' When we left, hundreds of thousands of Germans turned out for ticker-tape parades to show their thanks for a job well done."

Every soldier who served in Berlin can be proud of the role he or she played in bringing an end to the Cold War, President Bill Clinton told the thousands of people, among 4,000 troops he reviewed in July 1994, when the colors of the Berlin Brigade were cased.

U.S. soldiers married Berliners and raised German-American children. They sang German songs at volksfests, drank beer with Berliners in local bars, and shopped along the famous Kurfurstendamm, lined with Berlin's finest restaurants, nightclubs and shops.

They lived in a city called "the most pro-American city in the World." For those soldiers, "the Cold War was palpable, the contrasts between communism and capitalism were visible, and the pain of West Berliners separated by the Wall was very real," said historians Robert Grathwol and Donita Moorhus in their book "American Forces in Berlin, 1945-1994."

"Soldiers carried home to the States an experience of Germany that continued to affect their lives," the historians said. "Many stayed in touch with friends made during their tour. Many retained an interest in German affairs. Most never forgot. It would be difficult to design an educational exchange program that left such an impact — on both sides."

Today, there are 30,000 native English speakers in Berlin, Hammersen said. "There's such a large U.S. contingent living in Berlin, in fact, that the German papers run a daily segment in English." □



Haus Am Checkpoint Charlie, a museum that has always stood near the Allied checkpoint, continues to educate people about the horrors related to the Wall and communism.